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Jefferson Davis's Place in History

AS REVEALED IN HIS LETTERS, PAPERS,
AND SPEECHES



BY
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THE TORGESON PRESS, JACKSON, MISS.

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MISSISSIPPI HISTORICAL DEPARTMENT

DUNBAR ROWLAND,

State Historian.

The Capitol

Jackson, Mississippi,


June 25, 1923.

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JEFFERSON DAVIS'S PLACE IN HISTORY AS RE- VEALED IN HIS LETTERS, PAPERS, AND SPEECHES

By DUNBAR ROWLAND, LL.D.

What is to be Jefferson Davis's place in history is a question that has been and is now one of the controversial subjects of American history.

There is at the present time, however, general agreement among historians, authors, jurists, writers and other leaders of public opinion in every part of the United States that the publication of the letters, papers and speeches of Jefferson Davis is indispensable to a clear understanding of the War for Southern Independence and of the fundamental principles involved in it. That the time has come for the publication of such a work is evident from the interest manifested in historical circles. Sectional appeals have lost their force and influence even in politics. Time and the tests and trials of the Great World War have given us as a people an open mind.

After all that has been written and said, the real Jefferson Davis and what he contended for are best portrayed in his written and spoken words. It is an historical commonplace that by no other method can the best results in history be obtained and the unclouded truth established. The maxim "Speech is a mirror of the soul: as a man speaks so he is" is as true today as it was when it was written nineteen hundred years ago.

Then a full and fair interpretation of the life and character of Jefferson Davis can best be made after a careful and impartial study of the best documentary sources of information. Such sources have never been adequately accessible to the writers of history nor have these essential materials ever been explored and studied in any sort of continuity.

It is generally conceded that among the most valuable historical materials in the United States concerning the War for American Independence are the original papers of such leaders as Washington, Jefferson, Madison, Adams and Franklin, which are preserved in the Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress. It has been truly said that the account books kept by Washington and Jefferson have given to historians an insight into their habits and characteristics which could not have been obtained from the Declaration of Independence nor the Farewell Address.

All men, great and small, reveal themselves consciously and unconsciously through their speech and writings. And while a single document or sporadic utterance might fail to portray the real character of a man, a true portrait of him may be had from a succession of his own words and writings. Left without such keys and clues the biographer becomes his own interpreter, following in many instances where inclination leads. But such efforts make history which cannot survive, since the day is passing when either excessive laudation or unjust criticism will serve to convince the mind. Controversy must cease in the face of indisputable proof, that is, if the interpreter approaches his subject with an open mind and a spirit free from fixed prejudice. That some require the nail print in the hand is still true and as Christ dealt with many such as Thomas, so shall men do to the end of time.

There are few historical figures whose character, purposes and capacities have received more widely-varying estimates than those of Jefferson Davis. Such conflicting opinions about great leaders have existed in the history of every country touching great crises in the national life. During the reign of Augustus Caesar, Emperor of Rome, and of his immediate successors, Marcus Junius Brutus, the last of the Roman Republicans, was portrayed as a monster, a murderer, and the embodiment of all evil. Two centuries after the establishment of the monarchy, the Emperor Marcus Antonius commends the character of Brutus as a perfect model of Roman virtue. It took English historians many years to acknowledge the genius and greatness of Oliver Cromwell. Clarendon, who was a contemporary of Cromwell, in his great work

"The History of the Rebellion" says of the Great Protector, "that he was a brave, bad man, with all the wickedness against which damnation is pronounced, and for which hellfire is prepared." Historians of a later period pictured him as a mixture of knave, fanatic and hypocrite. In the latest edition of the *Encyclopedia Britannica*, Cromwell is portrayed in these words: "In him are found the true principles of piety, of justice, of liberty and of goodness," and that is the opinion of the English people today. Many historians who were contemporaneous with Jefferson Davis have given us the same crude and prejudiced estimates of him. The English people have erected a worthy statue in honor of Oliver Cromwell at Westminster, "in the midst of the Sanctuaries of the Law, the Church, and the Parliament, the three foundations of the State which he subverted, and in the sight of Whitehall where he destroyed the monarchy in blood." In time, too, the American people, who are equally if not more generous and fairminded than either the Romans or the English, regardless of latitude and longitude, will place in the Capitol at Washington, which Jefferson Davis planned, perfected and beautified, a statue in honor of the great man who loved justice as ardently as did Cromwell, Hampden, Burke, Washington and Adams, and who sacrificed and suffered more than any of these for conscience' sake.

Seneca, the learned Roman statesman and philosopher, says: "Time discovers truth." There is hope in that maxim and its truth has been attested countless times in the world's history.

There is something in the human heart which refuses to accept permanently prejudiced estimates. No just man nor his cause ever permanently suffers from misrepresentation. If men and women of British origin and ancestry are given time they will more readily perhaps than any other people throw off the trammels of prejudice and ill will. This is true of the American, I believe of both the North and of the South. At the close of the War for Southern Independence Abraham Lincoln was execrated in the South as a coarse, vulgar, cunning and inhuman monster; now, fifty-eight years after his death, it is generally conceded that if he had lived to serve out

his second term the South would have been spared the horror and disgrace of Reconstruction. From 1865 to 1867 Jefferson Davis was anathema in the North and universally regarded as a traitor and the instigator of the assassination of Abraham Lincoln; now no one of any decent amount of intelligence holds such opinions; the best opinion of the North is that Jefferson Davis contended to the very verge of hostilities for the preservation of the rights of the States as laid down in fundamental law rather than for the destruction of the central government.

In order to account for many of the characteristics of men, it is necessary to go back to their racial antecedents, for in them we find reflected traits and virtues. Just as it is necessary to study England and its institutions in order to understand our own country, it is important in explaining Jefferson Davis to know that he was descended from Welsh and Scotch-Irish ancestry, two races as much in love with individualism, self-determination and community independence as any on earth. When we know that Jefferson Davis came from the same racial stocks that produced Robert Bruce, William Wallace, John Knox, Rhodrie Mawr and Owen Glendower, we can readily understand why he is one of the world's greatest examples of unshaken faith and fidelity to a cause, the principles of which had been bequeathed to him by liberty-loving ancestors in the mother country, principles which had been strengthened by the pioneer life of free America and made a part of his very being by profound studies in the doctrines of democratic government.

What conclusions may be finally reached concerning the place of the President of the Southern Confederacy in history from the study of the ten volumes of his letters, papers and speeches is a matter of world wide interest; every cultured nation is asking for documentary sources concerning his career.

That Jefferson Davis was a Constitutionalist in the best sense, in that he adhered with unfaltering steadfastness to the old interpretation as held by those who made the Constitution is as clearly shown in his writings as is the patriotism of Washington indicated in every line he penned. His position on the right of a State to resume its sovereignty was the

same as that of George Washington, Thomas Jefferson, Alexander Hamilton, George Clinton, John Adams and all of the great commentators on and interpreters of the Constitution from 1789 to 1860. In his conviction of the justice of the cause with which his name is inseparably linked, Mr. Davis never wavered. In holding the right of a State to withdraw from the Union when the people believed that their constitutional rights were invaded he held himself warranted by indisputable precedents and by sound reasoning, and in living up to the faith that was in him he believed that he did his duty. In every utterance made before the War and in his "Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government" he sets forth his interpretation of the Constitution with great clearness and cogency.

It has been frequently stated in histories of the United States that Jefferson Davis and Robert E. Lee were not in accord on the question of the right of the Southern States to secede from the Union. All such statements are inaccurate and misleading. What General Lee's position on that question was is clearly and unmistakably recorded in a letter to Colonel McCulloh, dated September 28, 1869, more than four years after the surrender at Appomattox, the original of which is now in the keeping of the Mississippi State Historical Department and published in "Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist" for the first time. Colonel McCulloh was a member of the faculty of Washington and Lee University, and was on a mission to France connected with the interests of that institution at the time the letter was written. I quote from the letter as follows:

"I am very much obliged for the kind sentiments felt for the South and the sympathy extended to our people. Every brave people who considered their rights attacked and their constitutional liberties invaded, would have done as we did. Our conduct was not caused by any insurrectionary spirit, nor can it be termed rebellious, for our construction of the Constitution under which we lived and acted, was the same from its adoption, and for eighty years we had been taught and educated by the founders of the Republic, and their written declarations which controlled our consciences and actions. The epithets that have been heaped upon us of 'Rebels' and traitors have no just meaning nor are they believed in by those who understood the subject, even at the North."

That then is the deliberately expressed opinion of General Lee on the right of secession. The identical position is taken in the farewell address of Jefferson Davis made in the Senate of the United States, January 21, 1861. In that notable speech he reiterated what he had said in other phrasing on every occasion when he discussed the subject.

"Then, Senators, we recur to the compact which binds us together; we recur to the principles upon which our government was founded, and when you deny them, and when you deny us the right to withdraw from a government which, thus subverted, threatens to be the destruction of our rights, we but tread the path of our fathers when we proclaim our independence and take the hazard. This is done, not in hostility to others, not to injure any section of the country, not even for our own pecuniary benefit, but for the high and solemn motive of defending and protecting the rights we inherited, and which it is our duty to transmit unshorn to our children."

From his entrance into public life in 1845 until his retirement from the Senate in 1861 Jefferson Davis was a nationalist in the truest sense of that term. Nothing of narrow, selfish sectionalism can be found in his speeches in the House of Representatives, in the Senate nor before the people. He wanted the United States to be a continental republic extending from the Atlantic to the Pacific. In the winning of the West Jefferson Davis as a soldier in the War with Mexico, as Secretary of War from 1853 to 1857 and as a United States Senator had a vision of the importance of the Pacific coast which no other public man of his day possessed. When other political and industrial leaders were condemning the expenditure of public money for exploring, surveying and mapping the great West, the far visioned Secretary of War was recommending and securing the necessary funds for linking that mighty expanse of territory to the Atlantic seaboard and to the Mississippi Valley. On his return to the Senate in 1857 he continued to contend for the opening up of this territory by means of a railroad from the Mississippi River to the Pacific. To Thomas Jefferson are the people of the United States indebted for the great Commonwealths carved out of the Louisiana Purchase; and to his namesake Jefferson Davis are they indebted for securing the first close social, political

and economic ties which united the West to the Union. To that end he advocated a mighty railroad to be built largely at public expense. When Jefferson Davis was contending for an increase in the army for the defense of the West other leaders were calling it a desert unfit for human habitation. The people of every state west of the Mississippi River should honor Jefferson Davis for the great service he rendered them both in war and in peace during the formative period of their history.

The position of Jefferson Davis during the session of Congress of 1860-61 has been obscured and misinterpreted. For many years after the War the favorite position of historians engaged in writing what is now ranked as propaganda was that Senator Davis and the other Senators from the South were conspiring during that historic session to destroy the Union. As a matter of fact the Senators from the South announced in December, 1860, that they would support any measure and accept any terms "that would secure the honor of the Southern States and guarantee their future safety." They were ready at all times to support the Crittenden Compromise, and but for the opposition of Republican leaders that Compromise would have been adopted and the war averted. When all true lovers of the Union were striving in the winter of 1860-61 to preserve it on the basis of the equality of all the States, Senator Davis said on the floor of the Senate:

"If, in the opinion of others, it is possible for me to do anything for the public good, the last moment while I stand here is at the command of the Senate. If I could see any means by which I could avert the catastrophe of a struggle between the sections of the Union, my past life, I hope, gives evidence of the readiness with which I would make the effort. If there be any sacrifice which I could offer on the altar of my country to heal all evils, present or prospective, no man has a right to doubt my readiness to make it."

The opinion is now quite general that the Crittenden Compromise had the approval of a large majority of the people North and South, and that its adoption would have been a satisfactory solution of the questions at issue. No fair-minded student of history can study the Congressional Record of December, 1860, and January, 1861, and say that Jef-

ferson Davis was not willing at all times to support any measures looking to the preservation of the Union, which were predicated upon the principles of the Constitution as made by the "Fathers of the Republic" and as interpreted by the Supreme Court.

After a fair and intelligent study of the historical material presented in "Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist, His Letters, Papers and Speeches," the following conclusions as to his place in history seem inevitable.

Jefferson Davis was one of the great American statesmen and orators. His parliamentary speeches are models of good form; there is erudition, conviction, belief, earnestness and eloquence in all the speeches he delivered in the House of Representatives and in the Senate. He was most convincing as a parliamentary orator, although he was gifted with many of the attributes of compelling popular eloquence. He appealed more to the understanding than to the feelings. He never sought to stir the people to violent and passionate emotion and action. But many of his speeches delivered during the War to the people and to the armies in the field are perfect types of lofty, convincing and impassioned eloquence. Above all form, matter and manner, there is something in the speeches of Mr. Davis which permeates every sentence, telling of sweet and noble sentiments lying behind his words. His speeches are not merely carefully prepared essays nor an array of lifeless words which had been carefully and patiently selected in the seclusion of the study, but living, burning, convincing expressions emanating from a brain and soul on fire with great and lofty ideals.

Taking his life at its most dramatic period, no historic figure moving over the stage of the world's great struggles for liberty presents a more sublime outline. As President of the Southern Confederacy he established a government complete in all its functions. In the administration of his varied public activities he displayed constructive and executive genius of a high order; these qualities combined with an invincible spirit which could not admit defeat until the last hope was shattered sustained the people of the Confederacy in their gallant struggle for independence. He heroically upheld the principles for which he and his government contended with a courage and

devotion that was marvelous, and with a fidelity unsurpassed in the history of the world. For four years he maintained a conflict which is conceded to be the miracle of the age. That his convictions as to the rights of the States under the Constitution were based upon no untenable ground a careful study of the record will reveal; that he would not yield nor recede from them was his only offense.

Summing up some of his great qualities about which there could be no controversy, he was a gallant soldier, a profound philosophical statesman and an accomplished scholar and author. He was the very soul of integrity, sincerity and chivalry; such traits made him ever careful of his personal and official honor. When these traits are found deeply rooted they create characteristics which blunter minds mistake for sensitiveness. His was a kindly, noble and affectionate nature, deeply dependent upon the verities and consolations of the Christian faith.

He never receded nor recanted; had he ever done so the verdict of history would have rightly condemned him. He showed his unfaltering faith in the principles which had guided his life in the last public paper that he penned in these words: "We do not fear the verdict of posterity on the purity of our motives, or the sincerity of our belief, which our sacrifices and our career sufficiently attested."

How the collection of originals and transcripts was made for the ten volumes of Jefferson Davis's Letters, Papers and Speeches and in what repositories the original materials are now held is a story of importance not unworthily associated with the interesting historical data contained in the manuscripts themselves.

The most important collection of Jefferson Davis papers is in the Confederate Memorial Hall at New Orleans. During the winter of 1911 that collection was arranged, studied and copied for future use. An account of that study was published in Harper's Magazine of December, 1911, from which the following quotation is taken on account of the freshness of the impressions made at the time.

"The perusal of the letters and papers of a leader of an unsuccessful cause, involving the position of a great body of people, is always an absorbing and fascinating occupation, all the more so, perhaps, because of the melancholy fact of failure, which when nobly sustained, rarely fails to excite our sympathy. Some such thought as this came to me during my research in the months of January and February of the present year among the official and private papers of Jefferson Davis, which are in the custody of the directors of Memorial Hall in the city of New Orleans.

"From his student days at Transylvania and West Point, it was a habit of Mr. Davis to carefully preserve his letters and papers, and many of his letters during later life refer to these earlier collections. At the close of the Civil War, when Richmond was evacuated, the executive archives of the Confederate government were, with all the President's private papers, securely boxed and taken to Danville, Virginia, on the special train which left the capital of the Confederate States on the night of April 2, 1865.

"Soon after his release from Fortress Monroe, Mr. Davis decided to prepare and publish a history of the Southern Confederacy, and, though he was several times diverted from his purpose, with that end constantly in view, he began to make more systematic efforts each year to locate and recover his papers, which were so necessary to the success of his undertaking. Upon investigation he found that some of the executive archives had been preserved by Col. Burton N. Harrison, his private secretary, while a great deal had been captured by Federal cavalry and placed in the custody of the War Department in Washington. Though meeting with only partial success he continued with unremitting efforts to collect his scattered records. When he went to live at Beauvoir, near the end of the seventies, he converted one of the offices which, in accordance with the usual custom in the South, was built separately from the main building, into a library, and it was here that he collected his material and prepared for the publishers his 'Rise and Fall of the Confederate Government.' At the time of his death in 1889 this little frame building was still the repository of his books, papers and many articles of historical value.

"After the death of Mr. Davis, his wife, realizing the danger of allowing his papers to remain permanently in a frame building, decided to deposit the collection in a safe place. Her first impulse was to give them to the State of Mississippi for safe keeping in the State Capitol in Jackson, but upon investigation it was found that the official archives of the State

were, at that time, very much neglected, and this fact caused her to turn her attention to the city of New Orleans, where, some years before the death of her husband, Mr. Harry T. Howard, a public-spirited citizen of that city, had presented a beautiful little fire-proof building to the Louisiana Historical Association, an organization of Confederate veterans that had made a large and valuable collection of historical relics relating to the Civil War. It was made the official repository of the collections of the New Orleans Confederate Camps, and it was here that Mrs. Davis finally decided to place her husband's papers. The papers were given to the Association with the reservation that certain designated documents were not to be investigated until after her death. It was in this picturesque, vine-clad structure then, filled with mementoes of the Lost Cause, and standing scarcely a stone's throw from beautiful Lee Circle, that I had the sad but highly-prized privilege of going through the public and private correspondence of the President of the Southern Confederacy, which had been preserved by his own hands. From the window where I sat I could see the impressive statute of Lee towering skyward as I read the words that he, himself, had penned to his trusted advisor; and while pouring over the yellowed manuscripts piled about me, in the favorable atmosphere of my surroundings, I realized, afresh, what a stupendous thing this Civil War of ours had been. What need have we to seek any other land or literature for a sublime story either of victory or defeat?

"It is a common thought among those engaged in research in original historical sources that the perusal of the correspondence of a great man lowers one's opinion of human nature. This may be true in many instances, but certain it is that the perusal of the war time correspondence of the Confederate leader with the men and women who followed his fortunes leaves no such impression. Whether the man, himself, inspired only the best in others, or that the times aroused it, or that the people were of a superior mold are interesting questions. But, however one or all of these may account for it, one is forcibly struck with the selfless note that rises above the melancholy strain of those sad and lamentable years as he continues to read.

"From a time-worn packet you take a letter from General Lee reporting the victory of Chancellorsville, in which he gives all the glory to his corps commanders and the gallant soldiers under them. Again he assumes the responsibility for the blunders of his subordinates, and takes to himself alone the failure of Gettysburg. In another letter one peruses the brave words of a Southern mother, who has given an only

son to her country. From still another packet, tied with tape of Confederate gray, you find a letter which tells of the wish of an Alabama woman to give her silver plate to be coined into money for the use of the Confederate Government. In reply to this letter Mr. Davis unconsciously pays the women of the Confederacy a tribute that has never been equalled during all these years of honoring her for what she was to the South at that crisis. That his conceptions of historical questions were true is shown in the estimate that he at that time placed upon her service, which is the same that history has made after the lapse of half a century. His reply to this patriotic offer is as follows: 'Accept my grateful acknowledgment of your generous offer to place your silver plate at the disposal of the Government with a view to its being coined into money.

"As Congress has not yet provided for the establishment of a coinage it would not be possible to carry out the object to which you desire so liberally to contribute, nor do I think that the time has yet come—and I trust that it may never come—when it will be necessary to make such a sacrifice as you propose. * * *

"The devotion, energy and patriotism which the daughters of the South have displayed since the commencement of our struggle for independence, as well as the fortitude with which they have parted with husbands, sons and brothers gone forth to the battlefield, as in the unremitting attention with which they have ministered to the wants, relieved the sufferings, and cheered the spirits of our gallant soldiers have won for them the undying gratitude of their countrymen, and will constitute one of the brightest records in our country's history.'

"No part of the Memorial Hall collection is more valuable than the correspondence of Mr. Davis after the war. From about 1874 to the time of his death in 1889 he conducted an extensive correspondence with Confederate leaders. These letters relate to subjects of great historical interest. In this collection one is found from General Lee upon the subject of Mr. Davis' release from Fortress Monroe which reveals the deep and tender friendship which existed between the President of the Southern Confederacy and the Commander of its armies. A bulky package in the collection made up from his correspondence after the war embraces letters from Judah P. Benjamin written in England and touching upon many controverted points of history. As one pours over the manuscripts a long line of great actors in the struggle of the South for independence passes before the eye: Benjamin writes of diplomacy, Memminger of finance, Hill and Barksdale of leg-

isolation, Reagan and others of the final disposition of the Confederate treasure, Seddon of the War Department, Pemberton describes Vicksburg, Lee writes of Gettysburg, Early of Manassas, and other participants in the struggle write upon many subjects of interest to the historian."

The collection of Jefferson Davis papers next in value and interest to the Confederate Memorial Hall collection is in the keeping of the Confederate Museum at Richmond. These papers were preserved by the late Mrs. Margaret Davis Hayes of Colorado Springs, the eldest daughter of Jefferson Davis, and were placed in the Confederate Museum by Jefferson Hayes Davis of Colorado Springs, a grandson of Jefferson Davis. This collection was carefully studied and many of the most interesting letters appearing herein are from that inspiring repository of Confederate history.

The Manuscripts Division of the Library of Congress and the Old Records Division of the War Department are repositories of Jefferson Davis material of great value and interest; both collections have been extensively drawn on, and some of the most illuminating letters here printed are from these collections.

The collections of the Mississippi Department of Archives and History, both official and unofficial, are rich in Jefferson Davis materials, and from that source comes much that is of special interest.

The controlling purpose which has guided the Editor from the beginning to the end of the undertaking has been to make every possible effort to give out a definitive edition of "Jefferson Davis, Constitutionalist, His Letters, Papers and Speeches." The work is in no sense the publication of selected letters, papers and speeches. No effort has been spared to collect and publish in continuity and in chronological order every bit of historical material which serves in any way to throw light on the causes of the War for Southern Independence and on the motives and principles which moved its leaders. Every letter appears as it is without editing and without expurgation, every speech is published as it was reported at the time of its delivery, every report is given as it was made. No matter from what repository the material came, if it was real, genuine and duly authenticated it was used. It has always been the claim

of the South that it had nothing to conceal, that the greater and closer the scrutiny into the motives and deeds of the people of the Southern States the more complete would be their justification by the historian.

The historical material contained in the publication tells the story of Jefferson Davis, the most dramatic figure in our national life. No other career equals his in tragic incidents nor in varied and important public service. His letters, papers and speeches are equal in style, scholarship, logical strength, clear interpretation of constitutional law, earnestness of conviction, statesmanship and power of expression to those of the greatest men of his time.

The publication makes available for the first time in one place valuable sources of information concerning fundamental facts relative to the progress, travail and final unification of the American Republic.

No other work can provide the student and historian with a more valuable collection of new, unknown and unpublished material concerning issues which divided the Nation, and which finally culminated in the War for Southern Independence.

In the preparation of the work for publication the author has had in his efforts to collect and publish an important contribution to American history the interest and encouragement of scholars and historians throughout the entire country.

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Jefferson Davis's place in history...

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